

Pennsylvania Allies Help Dozens of Orphans Make It to America

PITTSBURGH — Dozens of Haitian orphans, accompanied by a team of medical personnel, arrived in Pittsburgh Tuesday, after a complex rescue mission that involved a military cargo plane, several federal agencies and some last-minute help from the White House.

Wall Street Journal

January 20, 2010

PITTSBURGH — Dozens of Haitian orphans, accompanied by a team of medical personnel, arrived in Pittsburgh Tuesday, after a complex rescue mission that involved a military cargo plane, several federal agencies and some last-minute help from the White House.

The 53 children, ranging from 11 months old to age 12, were among 148 orphans at the Br bis de Saint-Michel de L'Attalaye orphanage in Port-au-Prince. Two Pittsburgh natives, 22-year-old Ali McMutrie and her 30-year-old sister, Jamie McMutrie Heckman, who have worked at the Haitian orphanage for several years, kicked off the rescue by tapping area family and friends and requesting help from Pennsylvania Gov. Ed Rendell and U.S. Rep. Jason Altmire.

Ali McMutrie, accompanied the children on the flight back. Her sister stayed behind to locate a missing two-year-old child, both of whom were expected to arrive later Tuesday.

The children, the smallest carried in blankets by volunteers, were taken by three buses for evaluation and treatment to the Children's Hospital, part of the University of Pittsburgh Medical Center health system. Officials at the hospital said none of the children were suffering from serious medical conditions.

The sisters said the earthquake devastated two of the orphanage's three buildings, prompting the children and staff to move out to the driveway with a dwindling supply of food, water and medical care.

In the chaos following last week's temblor, many Haitian adoption efforts have been stymied by lost paperwork or bureaucratic logjams. An estimated 700 to 800 Haitian orphans are in the process of being adopted.

On Monday, the U.S. granted entry to Haitian orphans already in line to be adopted by U.S. citizens or who have been cleared for the process by agencies and matched to prospective U.S. parents. The Department of Homeland Security said eligible orphans would be considered on a case-by-case basis following the earthquake.

Homeland Security Secretary Janet Napolitano ordered the so-called humanitarian parole. It wasn't immediately clear how many children could be affected.

The Pittsburgh-bound mission began immediately after the quake, when Rep. Altmire said the McMutrie sisters' parents contacted him to seek help in bringing their daughters home. He approached officials at the White House and State Department over the next five days.

Gov. Rendell and his wife, Marjorie Rendell, a federal judge, became involved when officials from UPMC called, saying they were having trouble securing permission to land a plane in Haiti to get the orphans out and asked him to contact Haiti's ambassador to the U.S. After receiving the ambassador's permission, he said he contacted officials at the Department of Homeland Security and the State Department.

UPMC helped arrange the Republic Airways plane, which left Pittsburgh at noon Monday and landed in Port-au-Prince Monday about 6 p.m. The trip was funded by an anonymous sponsor who chartered a jetliner for the trip down.

The effort was almost derailed in the final hours Monday when Haitian officials said seven of the 54 children, who didn't have adoptive parents lined up, wouldn't be allowed to leave. The sisters said they wouldn't leave without all the children.

Gov. Rendell said he and others tried to persuade the McMurtrie sisters to leave the seven children behind, but that the sisters refused. "The girls took the position of all or none," he said.

That led to six frantic hours of negotiations with Haitian and U.S. officials. Gov. Rendell and Rep. Altmire remained at the airport in Port-au-Prince and telephoned U.S. officials, including the National Security Council, while Mrs. Rendell and several UPMC officials spent about five hours at the U.S. embassy trying to marshal support..

Clearance was finally given but by then the private plane had to leave in order to meet the State Department rule that it remain on the ground for no more than an hour. Then, according to the governor, a U.S. Air Force major offered a C-17 cargo plane, which had just landed from Charleston.S.C., with supplies, to bring the group Orlando, Fla., where they went through customs before flying on to Pittsburgh on another plane.

Most of the children already have homes lined up. Forty will remain in the U.S., while three will go to Canada and four will go Spain. Seven of the children don't have families yet.

Gloria Hochman, director of communications at the National Adoption Center, a Philadelphia-based nonprofit that aims to expand adoption opportunities, said about 700 to 800 children in Haiti are awaiting adoption into the U.S.

"To find those children and to be able to move them and get them here is going to take a tremendous amount of work. I don't think it's going to be done overnight." She commended the effort to get the children to Pittsburgh.